



# Association of United States Catholic Priests

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For immediate release*

## **Priests offer voice of experience, 'hope and joy,' for Vatican Synod on families**

### **Nearly 600 priests respond to "How can" questions with "How to" suggestions for pastoral ministry to families**

A delegation from the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, with survey results from 572 priests, has presented its findings to the Vatican as part of preparations for the 2015 Synod on the family.

"Everything we presented is based on decades of pastoral ministry to families," said the Rev. Bernard "Bob" Bonnot, a priest of the Youngstown Diocese and chair of the AUSCP leadership team, who edited the final report. "It's not controversial, it's honest. It comes from our experience in counseling and confession."

Father Bernard Survil, a priest of the Diocese of Greensburg in Pennsylvania, sent questionnaires from the AUSCP to association members and also to available email addresses of priests listed in the Kennedy Directory. Responses were collated from the priests, all in good standing, and presented to the Secretariat on the Synod at the Vatican by Father James Schexnayder from the Diocese of Oakland and Father John Stabeno from the Diocese of Camden, who are members of the AUSCP leadership team. They were accompanied by Margaret Mary Moore, AUSCP consultant from St. Louis.

The document, "A Priests' Voice of Hope and Joy Within our Pilgrim Church regarding Pastoral Ministry to Families," includes priests' responses to the 46 questions prepared in anticipation of the 2015 Ordinary Synod on the Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World. The report concludes that "the responses of 572 priests reported here reflect 21,139 years of pastoral experience."

### **Offering practical advice**

The priests point out that the Synod preparation materials include a preponderance of “How can . . . ?” questions. “We take that to mean that the Secretariat for the Synod is looking for practical advice, what the Church can do to respond pastorally to God’s people.”

The first important question, according to the priests who responded to the survey, was “How can people be helped to understand that no one is beyond the mercy of God?” Their responses were listed as bullet points, including the following:

- By grasping that people will understand the mercy of God when they experience the mercy of the Church
- By becoming a “field hospital” for our wounded and fragile families
- By welcoming rather than rejecting and discriminating against the divorced/remarried, gay/lesbian Catholics
- By revising antiquated canonical processes to make them instruments of pastoral ministry, including enabling internal forum solutions
- By showing mercy in the confessional
- By respecting conscience in resolving moral dilemmas

This same approach was used to respond with positive suggestions to other questions posed for Synod preparation. The surveyed priests identified a range of topics, including seminary formation and training in pastoral ministry, emphasizing the central role of parents as primary catechists of their children, learning from Mormons and Evangelicals, and “reverencing and celebrating the vocation of married life.”

“It’s extremely important that we support the sacramental realities of marriage and family,” Bonnot said. “How can a familial spirituality be developed and how can families become places of new life in Christ? — this question, one of the questions asked for the Synod, is central to our ministry.” Bullet point responses included the following:

- By translating magisterial teaching into language that connects with people’s lived experience of God and church
- By having those with lived experience bring out the concrete ways the rhythms, cycles and events of married life reveal the Paschal Mystery
- By engaging the assistance of trained lay people
- By improved adult faith formation
- By family-centered catechesis
- By family service projects
- By priests’ participating in family events, listening with the heart and speaking from it
- By being inclusive of diverse family structures and faiths, including same gender and non-Christian partners

### **Support for the ministry and initiatives of Pope Francis**

The responses of U.S. priests “reflect the deep compassion for and commitment to the people they serve as they face the challenges of married life,” said the document. “The comments also reflect deep support for the ministry and

initiatives of Pope Francis based on the priority of gospel mercy.” The document presented also included several verbatim comments from participating priests. Among them were these:

“The mercy of God sustains us. God does not expect perfection in how we live. We live with our strengths and weaknesses. We make mistakes. Grace is the mercy of God that surrounds us with forgiveness and strength to move in a direction that draws us closer to God. We need to encourage this movement rather than punish people for not reaching perfection!”

“. . . The Church needs to stop condemning relationships that are loving and life giving because they somehow don’t fit the template of RC church doctrine.”

“Our present procedures *re* determining nullity need to be dramatically reformed. We are pushing people out of the Church.”

“Church policies seem so distant from Jesus of the gospel.”

“What is needed is a greater and growing understanding of Church as family, as a model for how families today can continue to evolve and grow. . . . This is necessary for us to grow as children of the world and children of God.”

### **Conclusion**

The AUSCP survey report “does not pretend to speak for all priests in the United States,” the text acknowledges. While it has its limits, “It concentrates on those *practical pastoral actions* priests believe can and should be taken to better minister to families in a way that reflects “truth and mercy for all,” “truth in charity.”

The AUSCP text concludes, “We pray with Pope Francis that our report will help ‘the collegial journey of the bishops and (that) with the involvement of the people of God, the Holy Spirit will guide us in finding the road to truth and mercy for all.’”

*Father Bernard “Bob” Bonnot, a priest of the Diocese of Youngstown, chairs the leadership team of the AUSCP and is available to speak for the association.*

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